

Conversation Classes

By Jiang Xia

In my English conversation class at Xuzhou Normal University, I only have a blackboard and some chalk. The class is made up of 70 students. These students are good at doing multiple-choice exercises but are poor at doing exercises in which they are asked to produce and create in the language. This weakness is due to the types of exams the students have to take at the end of the semester. In the class, the students are encouraged to think in English instead of translating, learn to write essays, and pass Level Four in a year's time. Both the teachers and the students are under much pressure to do well. I believe that my first responsibility is to help the students make rapid progress in speaking the language. I usually focus on speaking activities beginning with the first class.

Teaching Plan

I begin by teaching some general expressions (e.g., "I'm sorry," asking directions). I follow this with situational expressions such as what to say at the bank or at the post office. The students are asked to recite all of the expressions. It is hard and sometimes boring. Most of them will recite because they are eager to speak the language. To make it interesting, I usually ask them to practice with their classmates.

To my surprise, most of the students, when asked to practice with their classmates, refuse to do so or at least don't put their hearts into it. When asked why, they tell me they think it is silly to talk in "baby English" and they feel embarrassed because they speak slowly and use broken English. To me, the shortcoming of this kind of practice is that I don't know who is practicing and who is chatting in Chinese. And if they make any mistakes, no one will correct them because the other students are preparing their own sentences. Feedback is the responsibility of the teacher, but I don't have time to check and monitor the performance of all of the students.

Second, I ask the students to listen to the VOA Special English program. I encourage them to try to imitate the English they hear in the program and to use it for their four-to-five-minute daily reports. The students like doing this. They learn much from their classmates this way. What's more, the other students' excellent work will be an impetus to them. However, the shortcoming of this activity is that they still do not communicate naturally.

In preparation for giving their reports, they listen to the VOA, read newspapers, translate, look up new vocabulary in their dictionaries, and talk about their report with others. With all of this preparation, they generally give an excellent report. Students who do not prepare for the reports are not able to answer my questions and they use broken English. To motivate the students, I try to give them interesting topics, but only some of the very brave students want to get involved. I realize that what I'm asking them to do might be too difficult.

An Activity

I often hear foreign teachers complain that Chinese students are too indirect and too silent. This is not always true. For example, I was at a party with my students and they were very active and noisy because they were playing an idiom game. Each student had to say an idiom containing four words. The last word of the idiom and the first word of the one following it had to be the same. The students were very active and happy as they were playing the game.

As I watched them an idea came to mind. Why not use this technique in class and ask each of them to say just one or two sentences and thus make a complete story? I tried it out during my next class. I told the students that they were going to tell a story and that each of them would be responsible for saying one or two sentences as part of the story. They seemed very pleased with the exercise. They also looked forward to the next class when we would do the exercise again.

I asked them why they liked the activity. They told me that they didn't feel pressured any more and that the lack of pressure made it easier for them to participate and say something. They also said that they weren't afraid of embarrassing themselves in front of their classmates because even if they didn't have much to say, one sentence was easy to deal with. The first time we did the story, it took 50 minutes because I had to break in constantly to correct their mistakes immediately, to insert some words to make the sentences connect, and sometimes to repeat to let everyone hear clearly. That took too long; so the next time we did the exercise, I divided the class into two. Now, while one half is telling the story, the other half is writing it down and making the necessary corrections.

Conclusion

After doing this exercise for two months, I can report that it works very well. The students show much more confidence in speaking. They think about what they are going to say and enjoy talking about various topics. They almost don't need me any more.

In conclusion, I know that when I give them a topic to talk about for the next class, they will participate and maybe even argue in English.

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